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Democracy and Epistemic Egalitarianism

Dominik Gerber

1. Introduction¹

Many advanced democracies, including the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, are seeing their highest level on record for democratic dissatisfaction.² Diminishing faith in the ability of democratic institutions to deliver, in turn, is associated with lower levels of democratic support and increased openness to autocracy.³ For the political philosopher and the concerned democrat alike, evidence of democratic disenchantment raises the difficult question of why people should want to continue living under democratic political conditions in spite of countervailing considerations. Consider an imaginary political argument between a convinced democrat—call her Emilia—and Viktor, who is so deeply disenchanting with what he considers to be the (both morally and epistemologically) corrupting effects of democratic equality that he came to advocate a system of government in which citizens are political *subordinates* to a charismatic autocrat. In Viktor's world, the politics of national renewal is antithetical to the idea that citizens have equal opportunities to advance their interests over matters of common concern.⁴ Accordingly, for Viktor, there no longer exists any sound moral case for sustaining key democratic institutions and practices such as equal suffrage, equality of

1 - I wish to thank Annabelle Lever and one anonymous reviewer for *Raisons politiques* for insightful comments on this article. I also would like to acknowledge the Swiss National Science Foundation for funding the postdoc project (n° 100017-162703) during which this article was written.

2 - Roberto S. Foa *et al.*, *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*, Cambridge: Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020, p. 2. Globally, according to the same study, the share of people who are "dissatisfied" with democracy has increased from 47.9 to 57.5% since 1995.

3 - Pedro C. Magalhães, "Government Effectiveness and Support for Democracy", *European Journal of Political Research*, 53:1, 2014, pp. 77-97.

4 - This is the notion of democratic (in)equality I shall be concerned with in this article. It is broadly consistent with the position held by contemporary theorists such as Thomas Christiano, Nico Kolodny or James Wilson. See Thomas Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and Its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; Nico Kolodny, "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy", *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 42:4, 2014, pp. 287-336; James L. Wilson, *Democratic Equality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

opportunities to run for office, or equal opportunities to access pre- and post-decision deliberations.⁵ What publicly acceptable reasons can Emilia marshal for persuading Viktor to sustain his commitment to democratic equality? Reasons, that is, which override the considerations Viktor might build up on experiences of political alienation, generalized distrust, systemic corruption, or simply outrage at certain outcomes of the democratic process?

In their reconstruction of a Peircean theory of democracy (PD), Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse cast the problem of democratic justification in terms congenial to the argument between Emilia and Viktor.⁶ The aim of democratic justification, they argue following a key pragmatist theme, is not to persuade some radical skeptic or amoralist about the falsehood of her foundations, but rather to address the doubter *within* democracy—the “challenger”, in other words, which has recently become the focal point of analysis in the political science literature on voter alienation and populism. For PD, Viktor’s philosophical mistake when relinquishing democracy for autocracy is to foreclose the opportunities for responsible epistemic agency. The central value of democracy, as Misak and Talisse put it, is its capacity to “secure” a set of fundamental epistemic norms which no one can reasonably reject because they are *always already presupposed* by our mundane practices of asserting beliefs.⁷ These norms include truth-aspiration, responsiveness to others’ reasons, and the corresponding virtues (or, as Talisse sometimes says, “capabilities”) of honesty, modesty, charity and integrity. Emilia, unlike Viktor, avoids self-refuting incoherence with the constitutive norms of belief *because she is supporting the political conditions that sustain them*.

5 - Historically, these institutions have been the main way to realize citizens’ claim to equal political status (which may itself be derivative of a pre-political form of egalitarian relationship, say, friendship). There is no need to rehearse the various arguments on the institutional requirements of democratic equality. For present purposes, I shall simply assume that in opposing institutions realizing equal opportunities to access power, Viktor parts company with an essential feature of *any* democratic constitution. Hence, I take Viktor’s political anti-egalitarianism to be a sufficient basis for calling him an antidemocrat.

6 - Misak’s seminal *Truth, Politics, Morality* seeks to equip the “hands-off liberal” with a rational, yet non-transcendental “basis of adjudication” to establish the wrongness of an imaginary Schmittian fascist. See: Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*, London: Routledge, 2000, at pp. 11-12. Talisse makes frequent references to positions opposing abortion, gay marriage, or the science curriculum when he argues that discontented citizens, who believe that some democratic outcomes violate their fundamental values, have overriding reasons to accept the democratic *status quo*. See: Robert B. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, ch. 1; *Idem.*, “Sustaining Democracy: Folk Epistemology and Social Conflict”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 16:4, 2013, pp. 500-519.

7 - Cheryl Misak and Robert B. Talisse, “Debate: Pragmatist Epistemology and Democratic Theory: A Reply to Eric MacGilvray”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22:3, 2014, pp. 366-376, at p. 368; see also Robert B. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, *op. cit.*, ch. 4; Cheryl Misak, “A Culture of Justification: The Pragmatist’s Epistemic Argument for Democracy”, *Episteme*, 5:1, 2008, pp. 94-105. That epistemological commitments of the Peircean kind are less controversial than moral commitments is debatable. Here, I will accept the claim for the sake of argument. On the controversy, see Matthew Festenstein, “Pragmatism, Inquiry and Political Liberalism”, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 9:1, 2009, pp. 25-44; Michael Bacon, “The Politics of Truth: A Critique of Peircean Deliberative Democracy”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 36:9, 2010, pp. 1075-1091; Henrik Rydenfelt, “Epistemic Norms and Democracy: A Response to Talisse”, *Metaphilosophy*, 42:5, 2011, pp. 572-588.

In this article, I shall proceed on the understanding that PD's normative appeal rests essentially in its connection with a conception of equality that is central to the relationship between *epistemic peers*.⁸ Epistemic peers, on Misak's and Talisse's Peircean account, act in consonance with the constitutive norms of belief. Accordingly, they relate to each other as equals in terms of epistemic standing, or in Talisse's words, as "fellow inquirers" or "equal participants in the epistemic enterprise of justification".⁹ The relational egalitarian norms of the community of inquiry apply to moral inquiry no less than to empirical inquiry. Truth requires us to take each other's experience seriously independently of its origin, and it forbids any presumption that the moral judgment of the "man on the Clapham omnibus" is inferior to that of the "novelist".¹⁰

To bridge the gap between epistemic equality thus conceived and democratic government, the Peircean justification builds on the plausibility of arguing that the *political* values of freedom, equality, and popular sovereignty instantiated in democratic institutions are the "entailment" or "political correlate" of the relations we engage in as epistemic peers. In a recent article, Eva Erman and Niklas Möller have rejected the idea that this "coherence argument" can offer a grounding of democracy.¹¹ For them, fundamental epistemic norms are "too weak" to underpin democratic norms of freedom, equality, and popular sovereignty, which leaves PD with the tragic choice of either having to retreat to instrumentalism (thus making the defense of democracy contingent on its capacity to realize epistemic commitments) or to relax the ambition of finding a freestanding epistemic justification of democracy.¹² I agree with the conclusion that Peircean epistemic norms are insufficient to justify democracy. As I shall argue in the remainder of this article, the coherence argument seems to pose particular difficulties with respect to the vindication of *democratic equality* understood as the broadly moral requirement that citizens be endowed—by means of suitable institutional mechanisms—with equal authority over matters of common concern. The trouble the Peircean argument poses for Emilia who seeks to establish the wrongness of Viktor's political anti-egalitarianism, I take it, is not so much a matter of its normative thinness—its

8 - I take this to be the most basic normative implication of the fundamental doxastic principles of truth-aspiration and reason-responsiveness. It is true that neither Misak nor Talisse explicitly frames these primary implications in relational egalitarian terms, but in terms of epistemic or deliberative virtues. However, their reconstruction of Peirce leaves little doubt (or so it seems to me) that the latter derive from the former. See e.g. Talisse's discussion of the "epistemic capabilities" which an "epistemically perfectionist" state should promote. See Robert B. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, *op. cit.*, at pp. 174-175.

9 - *Ibid.*, at p. 70 and p. 124.

10 - Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, *op. cit.*, at p. 96.

11 - Eva Erman and Niklas Möller, "Why Democracy Cannot Be Grounded in Epistemic Principles", *Social Theory and Practice*, 42:3, 2016, pp. 449-473, at p. 455. For related criticism, see Annabelle Lever and Clayton Chin, "Democratic Epistemology and Democratic Morality: The Appeal and Challenges of Peircean Pragmatism", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 22:4, 2017, pp. 432-453.

12 - Eva Erman and Niklas Möller, "Why Democracy Cannot Be Grounded in Epistemic Principles", *art. cit.*, at p. 472.

detachment from moral principles—, but of its axiology. In a nutshell: to argue that any self-conscious believer *takes herself* to sustain democracy, and therefore to sustain democratic equality, is to argue that democratic equality makes a non-instrumental contribution to the realization of the epistemically egalitarian ideal of inquiry. Once PD's justificatory structure is thus laid out (Sections 2 and 3), several difficulties arise (Sections 4 and 5) which put important obstacles to Emilia's efforts to demonstrate the incoherence of Viktor's political inequality. My aim is to show that democratic equality is not a constituent component of Peircean epistemic egalitarianism, and that politically inequality institutional mechanisms, if properly justified, may be compatible with a community of epistemic peers.

2. The Contributory Epistemic Value of Democracy

By resting democracy's justification on its relationship with truth, PD falls squarely in the lineage of contemporary theories of epistemic democracy.¹³ PD shares with mainstream articulations of the epistemic paradigm the view that—*pace* Rawls—truth needs to be rehabilitated as a legitimate part of our common ground for public justification.¹⁴ Like many non-pragmatist epistemic democrats, Misak and Talisse believe that truth aspirations offer a non-controversial starting point if power arrangements are to be justified under circumstances of “deep politics”, where citizens routinely make political judgements invoking fundamental moral commitments.¹⁵ And there are interesting similarities in tone between the pragmatist emphasis on metaphysical modesty—that justifications should be sought “down to earth”, within the realm of lived experience, rather than within moral theory—and appeals by non-pragmatist epistemic democrats to defend democracy not (only) in virtue of the moral quality of its procedures, but in virtue of the “tangible” outcomes of its institutions.¹⁶

Despite such similarities, PD occupies a fairly unorthodox position within the epistemic paradigm because of its rejection of instrumentalism. Misak and

13 - See e.g. David M. Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008; Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013; Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

14 - For non-pragmatist criticisms of Rawls's “method of avoidance”, see Joshua Cohen, “Truth and Public Reason”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 37:1, 2009, pp. 2-42; Hélène Landemore, “Beyond the Fact of Disagreement? The Epistemic Turn in Deliberative Democracy”, *Social Epistemology*, 33:1, 2017, pp. 277-295.

15 - Robert B. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, *op. cit.*, at p. 35.

16 - Hélène Landemore explicitly makes this point in “Beyond the Fact of Disagreement?”, *op. cit.*, at p. 286. See also Josiah Ober, *Demopolis: Democracy Before Liberalism in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, at pp. 11-12. On the kinship between epistemic democracy and political realism, see Zhichao Tong, “Political Realism and Epistemic Democracy: An International Perspective”, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 19:2, 2020, pp. 184-205.

Talisse have repudiated the view that the value of democracy depends upon its ability to yield epistemically superior outcomes.¹⁷ This notably sets them apart from what has been called the “epistemic turn” in deliberative democracy and its corresponding endeavors to model innovative truth- or efficiency-tracking decision-making mechanisms.¹⁸ For the Peircean democrat, the value of democracy is derivative in a different—I shall call it, following C.I. Lewis, *contributory*—sense:¹⁹ on the contributory account of value, democracy has value not because it is causally conducive to some good outcome (though it may be that as well), but because of its *mereological* status as an essential part of some greater ideal whole.²⁰ This ideal is for the Peircean the *community of inquiry*, or as Talisse sometimes would say, the “open society”, in which there are no epistemic superiors or inferiors.

According to what I count among the most characteristic claims of Peircean political theory, the value of the epistemically egalitarian community of inquiry remains incomplete in crucial respects if taken in isolation. For the Peircean, the community of inquiry can be understood fully only in conjunction with democratic institutions realizing political equality.²¹ Politically egalitarian arrangements, then, are an essential component of a non-hierarchical and virtuous social-epistemic environment. This, I take it, is the axiology at work when Misak and Talisse say that a democratic order “enables”, “best secures” or is “entailed” by our fundamental interest in truth. The part-whole relationship between democratic equality and epistemic equality finds expression in passages like the following:

We individually cannot expect to arrive at true beliefs under political conditions where other individuals feel too intimidated, dominated, insecure, alienated, or vulnerable to raise their concerns and share their reasons. In short, *proper believing commits us to treating others as fellow epistemic agents* (...). And this in turn commits

17 - More explicitly so in their more recent publications. See e.g. Robert B. Talisse, “Response to Lever”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 18:1, 2015, pp. 82-85, at p. 83; Cheryl Misak, “A Pragmatist Account of Legitimacy and Authority: Holmes, Ramsey, and the Moral Force of Law”, in Susan Dieleman, David Rondel, and Christopher Voparil (eds.), *Pragmatism and Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 295-307, at p. 305.

18 - Melissa Schwartzberg, “Epistemic Democracy and Its Challenges”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 18, 2015, pp. 187-203, at p. 189.

19 - Charles Irving Lewis, *The Ground and Nature of the Right*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1955, at p. 68. See for an overview of various approaches to the value of democracy, Elena Ziliotti, “Democracy’s Value: A Conceptual Map”, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 54, 2020, pp. 407-427.

20 - The point here is that democracy’s goodness is never wholly derivative of the goodness of its consequences, but also never wholly non-derivative. That she adopts the same axiological view is suggested by Elizabeth Anderson’s definition of non-instrumentalism: “The proper test of the noninstrumental goodness of an activity is not whether we’d still prefer to do it, even if it didn’t result in desirable consequences. It is rather whether we’d still prefer to engage in it, even if the same consequences could be brought about by other (passive) means”. Elizabeth Anderson, “Democracy: Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental Value”, in Thomas Christiano and John Christman (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009, pp. 213-227, at p. 225.

21 - Hilary Putnam has arrived at a very similar argument invoking the pragmatism of John Dewey. See Hilary Putnam, “A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy”, *Southern California Law Review*, 63, 1990, pp. 1671-1697.

to a political order *in which individuals can see themselves, and are seen by others, not as subjects or subordinates, but as full citizens*, that is, agents in the proper sense, persons not subject to the arbitrary power of another.²²

(...)[B]ecause we are political equals, we can build relationships beyond our political roles and see one another as something in addition to political actors. As equal authors of a shared political order, we can exercise authorship of our nonpolitical lives by cultivating valuable relationships with others—relationships of creativity, support, fidelity, love, and care that have little if anything to do with politics. It might seem odd, but democracy's value lies in its being good for enabling valuable relationships beyond politics.²³

Absent institutions favoring political equality, the value of the community of inquiry would suffer, to the extent that the community would forfeit its ability to realize basic doxastic norms. More technically speaking, if democracy has contributory value at Peircean ideal world w , then subtracting democracy from w would decrease the non-derivative value of w by more than the non-derivative value of democracy itself.²⁴ If democracy would enhance the value of the ideal whole (the epistemically egalitarian society) only because it is good in itself, then the value of the whole would be equal to the sum of the non-derivative value of democracy and the non-derivative values of its other components. This cannot however be what Peircean democrats have in mind when they seek to respond to anti-democrats like Viktor. Recall that Peircean democrats don't take democracy to be intrinsically desirable, to the extent, for example, that democracy realizes some universal principle of justice in collective decision-making. They grant that democratic procedures may be a source of unhappiness and despair, in particular when they result in odious outcomes.²⁵ The Peircean rejoinder to Viktor's claim—that (a sufficient level of) indignation at democracy's outcomes cancels one's reasons to uphold democratic equality—is different: what justifies democratic equality *in spite of* countervailing considerations is not the value its internal features would possess in an empty universe, but rather its contribution to the accomplishment of a valuable state that ranges—far beyond politics—to our truth-seeking social practices.²⁶ For PD, in other terms, the value that accrues to democracy non-derivatively in virtue of its internal features alone underdetermines the normative power democracy imposes on self-conscious believers.

22 - Robert B. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, *op. cit.*, at pp. 124-125 (emphasis added).

23 - Robert B. Talisse, "Democracy: What's It Good For?", *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 89, 2020, pp. 44-49, at p. 48 (emphasis added).

24 - Ben Bradley, "Extrinsic Value", *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 91:2, 1998, pp. 109-126, at p. 120.

25 - Robert B. Talisse, "Sustaining Democracy: Folk Epistemology and Social Conflict", art. cit.

26 - According to Eric Beerbohm, another indication that the value of democracy must be derivative (either instrumentally or non-instrumentally) follows from the fact that our indignation about an odious decision is often greater when it had been enacted democratically: "If the significance of injustice can be heightened by its democratic pedigree, this lends support to the conditionality of the value of a democratic procedure". Eric Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, at pp. 36-37.

3. Necessity

So for Misak and Talisse democracy is valuable in a non-instrumental contributory sense because it is an essential component of an epistemically egalitarian community. But what exactly is it to be an “essential component” of some greater valuable whole? To say that value accrues to democracy in virtue of its mereological relationship with equal epistemic standing begs the question as to the *obligatoriness* of democracy.²⁷ Clearly, an argument that aims to reveal the philosophical mistake of Viktor and his anti-egalitarian fellows would need to offer more than just to show that democracy is a component of valuable epistemic ideal. For a justification of democracy to have political weight in the struggle against anti-democratic competitors, it must involve a deontic claim that democracy ought to be established or sustained regardless of the possibility of countervailing contextual circumstances. This is the reason why the establishment of democracy as a contributory part of a valuable whole requires a *necessity condition*: democracy is obligatory if it can be demonstrated that equalizing opportunities to access political power is a *necessary* component of the ideal of inquiry, which is to say that democracy comprises the institutional conditions *under which alone* inquirers can be proper truth seekers. The value of the ideal, in this justificatory pattern, becomes fully conditional on the presence of democracy, that is, at a minimum, an institutional enactment of citizen’s equal political status.

Misak and Talisse leave no doubt that their argument involves a necessity condition. For them, failure to sustain democratic commitments will damage the social-epistemic conditions under which different perspectives and experiences receive equal consideration; and in the absence of such equal consideration, “reaching the best or the true belief is not on the cards”.²⁸ This perspective echoes the idea that if you value epistemic equality, you are obliged to value the conditions that give rise to it.²⁹ While necessary mereological relationships are distinct from necessary instrumental relationships in that they don’t involve a causal contribution (having democratic institutions does not *cause* us to become epistemic peers), both subscribe to some version of consequentialism.³⁰ At a minimum, this implies that, in both cases, the truth of the necessity condition—that having democracy is necessary for bringing about

27 - See Christian F. Rostbøll, “Democracy as a Good in Itself: Three Kinds of Non-Instrumental Justification”, in Ester Herlin-Karnell, Matthias Klatt, and Héctor Morales (eds.), *Constitutionalism Justified: Rainer Forst in Discourse*, Oxford: Oxford University, 2020, pp. 235-264, at p. 258; Daniel Viehoff, “XIV—The Truth in Political Instrumentalism”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 117:3, 2017, pp. 273-295, at p. 278.

28 - Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, *op. cit.*, at p. 94.

29 - This resembles Charles Taylor’s valuation of cultural identity as constitutively contributing to the enjoyment of “irreducibly social goods:” if it is true that enjoying a work of art or speaking one’s native language languages is good, then so is, “other things being equal”, the cultural background that “makes these things possible”. Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, at pp. 136-138.

30 - Consequentialist theories of value feature prominently in the work of democratic theorists with pragmatist—including Deweyan—leanings. See e.g. Elizabeth Anderson, “Democracy: Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental Value”, *art. cit.*, at pp. 225-226; Jack Knight and James Johnson,

good—must be established conceptually or empirically.³¹ Positing a necessary *empirical* relationship between democratic equality and epistemic equality would require scientific evidence supporting the rejection of the null hypothesis that egalitarian epistemic relations can be had and sustained also in the absence of democracy. Understandably, this is not the approach Peircean democrats propose. Instead, the necessary relationship between Peircean epistemic norms and democracy is assumed to be *conceptual*.³²

There are various ways in which one might argue that democratic equality is, conceptually speaking, a necessary part of an epistemically egalitarian society. For instance, one might say that not having epistemic inferiors or superiors is simply a requirement, or a consequence, of a broader relational egalitarian conception of “a society whose members relate to one another on a footing of equality”.³³ Political equality embodied in democratic institutions, then, is obligatory because of the “fact that democracy is a particularly important constituent of a society in which people are related to one another as social equals, as opposed to social inferiors or superiors”.³⁴ Or one might say, with Philip Kitcher, that equal access to agenda-setting power is necessary for a “well-ordered science”, e.g. for avoiding that scientific research agendas or the application of research results inadequately represent the interests of some members of society.³⁵ A third line of argument is the one offered by Misak and Talisse. It holds that the epistemically egalitarian society is not self-sustaining, but dependent on the availability of political feedback mechanisms that enable us to *monitor* the surrounding social-epistemic environment and, in case we deem it dysfunctional, to challenge and correct it. Hence the need for the enactment of the rule of law, free elections, and for giving “all believers an equal vote”.³⁶ Somewhat confusingly, the conception of democracy that supposedly best secures these feedback mechanisms carries different names across the writings of both Misak and Talisse. Whereas Misak seems to sympathize with a conception of deliberative democracy, Talisse considers a representative democratic conception “along roughly Madisonian lines” (which he opposes to a direct-democratic conception) sufficient for epistemic monitoring.³⁷

The Priority of Democracy: Political Consequences of Pragmatism, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, at p. 44.

31 - Elena Ziliotti, “Democracy’s Value: A Conceptual Map”, art. cit., at p. 16.

32 - “[T]he connection between Open Society norms and democratic political norms is not merely instrumental, but conceptual”. Robert B. Talisse, “Sustaining Democracy: Folk Epistemology and Social Conflict”, art. cit., at p. 517.

33 - Samuel Scheffler, “The Practice of Equality”, in Carina Fourie, Fabian Schuppert, and Ivo Walliman-Helmer (eds.), *Social Equality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 21-44, at p. 21

34 - Nico Kolodny, “Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy”, art. cit., at p. 287.

35 - Philip Kitcher, *Science, Truth, and Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University, 2003, at p. 129.

36 - Robert B. Talisse, “Pragmatist Political Philosophy”, *Philosophy Compass*, 9:10, 2014, pp. 123-130, at p. 128.

37 - Cheryl Misak, “Making Disagreement Matter: Pragmatism and Deliberative Democracy”, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 18:1, 2004, pp. 9-22; Robert B. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, op. cit., at p. 125.

I shall turn to the latter argument in the next section in some detail. What needs to be retained from the preceding remarks is this: to say that democracy, and democratic equality in particular, makes a necessary non-instrumental contribution to securing valuable epistemic relationships places strong conceptual constraints on our understanding of democracy and the associated questions of institutional design. Unfortunately, Peircean democrats have not given these constraints sufficient attention. While PD's justificatory structure may exempt Misak and Talisse from endorsing an "epistemic conception" of democracy in Joshua Cohen's original sense (assuming, for instance, that voting aggregates epistemic judgments rather than personal preferences),³⁸ they cannot avoid taking a stand on the benefits which politically egalitarian institutions and practices *eo ipso* offer for the full realization of the Peircean epistemic ideal.

4. Equal Epistemic Standing and Democratic Equality

In this section I want to argue that once PD's axiological structure is correctly understood, the epistemic justification of democratic equality becomes problematic. Failures to endow citizens with equal abilities to advance their political interests, if properly justified, need not create a prejudice on nonhierarchical epistemic relations and, thus, on the Peircean constitutive norms of belief. To see why this is so, it is helpful to focus on democracy's *monitoring* function, which appears for Misak and Talisse to play a central role in the conceptual relationship between epistemic norms and democratic institutions. Talisse puts the point thus:

The key for getting from [Peircean] Open Society norms to democratic norms lies in the concept of self-reflexive social epistemic norms. In order to assess ourselves as satisfying the first-personal norms, we must be able to assess ourselves as forming our beliefs within a reliable social epistemic system. But in order to be able to assess our social epistemic system as reliable, we have to be able to see it as self-monitoring and self-correcting...The democratic institutional norms—equality, rule of law, universal suffrage, regular elections, and the like—are the political mechanisms by which the self-reflexivity of the Open Society norms can be enacted...In other words, we need democracy in order to monitor and correct our social epistemic system.³⁹

Hence, to defend democratic institutions against the likes of Viktor is to defend the necessary conditions for assessing and criticizing the functioning of the community of inquiry. An important implication of this claim is that, absent democratic monitoring and the corresponding policy feedbacks, inquiry among epistemic equals is not sustainable and will ultimately decay. Although neither Misak nor Talisse have offered a detailed account of the components of democracy's monitoring function and of the role played by political equality

38 - Joshua Cohen, "An Epistemic Conception of Democracy", *Ethics*, 97:1, 1986, pp. 26-38.

39 - Robert B. Talisse, "Sustaining Democracy: Folk Epistemology and Social Conflict", art. cit., at p. 516 (emphasis in the original).

in it, it is clear that they take democratic arrangements such as the equal vote—in a Millian sense—as a corrective to breakdowns within the epistemically egalitarian system, and not so much as a corrective to policy failure such as, for instance, in the case of an inefficient provision of public goods. These observations allow us to accomplish the presentation of PD’s axiology laid out in the previous two sections: for Peircean democrats, democracy is valuable in a non-instrumental contributory sense because the *monitoring provisions it institutionalizes* are a constituent component of an epistemically egalitarian community.

At this point, we might wonder whether the anti-democratic, politically inegalitarian society preferred by Viktor, in which some citizens have more power than others, indeed deprives the community of inquiry of the monitoring mechanisms on which its long-term reliability vitally depends. Could we satisfy the conditions for truth-apt and reason-responsive epistemic agency and yet not relate as political equals? If it were true that we could monitor the sustainability of our social-epistemic environment in non-democratic ways, the Peircean argument against Viktor is in trouble.

Consider the case of self-governing resource communities which successfully overcome collective action problems (e.g. leading to the depletion of a natural resource on which their livelihood depends) by devising formal and informal institutional rules.⁴⁰ Cases in point are irrigation systems, forests, or the governance of the Internet. There is now a broad consensus that the ability of resource communities to effectively monitor rule compliance and the sustainability of the resource system—one of the “design principles” for long-enduring self-governance systems—depends in crucial ways on their ability to collect and aggregate the situated knowledge of all appropriators. Hence the requirement that effective resource monitoring involves the capacity of the community to sustain and continuously self-assess its own epistemic reliability. Citing anthropological field research on community forests in South Asia, Elizabeth Anderson helpfully lays out the relationship between epistemic reliability, monitoring mechanisms, and democratic equality. Entrenched epistemic hierarchies—in particular: failure of the community to attend to women’s situated knowledge (e.g. regarding optimal tree species or regarding sites of illegal foraging activity)—are a primary cause of monitoring failures (and consequential resource mismanagement) in South Asian community forests. Drawing on such evidence, Anderson then argues that the objective of making local-level governance systems more responsive to women’s situated knowledge generates a strong case for their democratization, in particular for universal inclusion and for the elimination of gendered power inequalities in communal rule-making procedures.⁴¹ Women’s prospects of having their testimonies taken seriously, Anderson suggests, hinge on the availability of democratic

40 - Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolutions of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

41 - Elizabeth Anderson, “The Epistemology of Democracy”, *Episteme*, 3:1-2, 2006, pp. 8-22, at p. 17; citing Bina Agarwal, “Participatory Exclusions, Community Forestry, and Gender: An

feedback mechanisms which recognize women's equal power to influence the rules of cooperation under which community forests operate. Equal universal suffrage, according to Anderson, is constitutive of reliable epistemic coordination within resource communities.

There are obvious parallels between Anderson's conclusion that "epistemic improvement and democratic reform go hand-in-hand"⁴² and the non-instrumental contributory defense of democratic equality espoused by Misak and Talisse. Both accounts don't take democracy to *cause* epistemic improvement, but rather to be a necessary constituent of a society in which people have equal epistemic standing (which does not exclude the possibility that equal epistemic standing may have also instrumental value, for instance in virtue of the surpluses of efficiency it brings about). And both accounts worry that epistemic hierarchy prejudices experimental problem-solving in a pluralist society. This parallel is remarkable because Misak and Talisse as well as Anderson seem to have arrived at essentially the same conclusion by following routes in pragmatist thought that are often taken to be in tension: Peircean epistemology in the case of Misak and Talisse and Deweyan democratic experimentalism in the case of Anderson. This is not the place to dwell on the exegetical question of whether the pragmatist tradition can offer a unitary justification of democracy. It suffices for our purposes to observe that there is room for a reading of Dewey's democratic ideal not (as in its mainstream reception) as a distinctively ethical conception of human flourishing, but as harboring a non-instrumental epistemic argument for democracy similar to the one Misak and Talisse locate in Peirce's epistemology.⁴³

It remains unclear, however, to what extent the case of self-governing resource communities discussed by Anderson offers a generalizable explanation of the necessity of democratic equality for equal epistemic standing. The main problem is that the demand that communities devise institutional mechanisms to monitor their own epistemic reliability does not fit well with the demand that opportunities to political influence be equally distributed. Historically, communities seeking to alleviate impediments to epistemic coordination—which all too often meant combatting epistemic hierarchies (and the ideologies condoning them)—have instituted very different distributions of power,⁴⁴ depending in

Analysis for South Asia and a Conceptual Framework", *World Development*, 29:10, 2001, pp. 1623-1648.

42 - Elizabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy", art. cit., at p. 21.

43 - For a helpful discussion of different epistemic readings of Dewey's democratic experimentalism, see Matthew Festenstein, "Does Dewey Have an 'Epistemic Argument' for Democracy?", *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 16:2-3, 2019, pp. 217-241. For an alternative "purely procedural" defense of democracy on the basis of pragmatist epistemology, see Fabienne Peter, "Democratic Legitimacy and Proceduralist Social Epistemology", *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 6:3, 2007, pp. 329-353; *Idem.*, *Democratic Legitimacy*, London: Routledge, 2011. However, Peter's account contrasts with Anderson's amongst other things in her reading of Dewey's epistemology as "consequentialist" and "veritistic". *Ibid.*, at pp. 120-121.

44 - The conceptual independence of epistemic hierarchies from moral (including political) hierarchies has recently been highlighted in Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, *Relational Egalitarianism: Living as Equals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, at p. 64.

part on whether these arrangements were a result of voluntary (e.g. contractual) agreement or of social conflict. Whereas the South Asian community forests may have succeeded to afford high levels of epistemic reliability and self-reflexivity by enhancing women's political rights, it is not difficult to find cases of other governance regimes with a (sometimes centuries-old) track record of epistemic equality and inclusiveness, but where monitoring and sanctioning power is held by elders, land owners who hold the largest share of land, community councils that disenfranchise women,⁴⁵ non-elected legal juries, or—as for instance in Internet governance—business-led supervisory bodies following a “multistakeholder” approach.

Clearly, agents involved in these monitoring arrangements have greater political power than other members of the community. They take decisions about matters of public interest (such as on specific reallocations of resource flows) and exercise discretion and independent judgment in defining and interpreting rules and sanctions. And yet it would seem odd to say that such politically inequalitarian institutional arrangements must be contributorily bad for epistemic inquiry. In some contexts, say, as users of *Wikipedia* or as forest appropriators in Nepal, we can relate as epistemic equals—and act in full compliance with the constitutive norms of belief—even in the absence of voting rights.⁴⁶ The members of a community of inquiry may have good epistemic reasons to tolerate unequal distributions of power. They might accept, for instance, that power advantages constitute a necessary *selective incentive* to induce a subset of fellow agents to cooperate in order to ensure that the epistemic system accounts for the situated knowledge of all agents.⁴⁷ If it can be shown that an institutional feedback mechanism other than democracy creates sufficiently favorable social-epistemic circumstances for inquiry, but entails lower contribution costs for each agent, there is little a Peircean democrat can say about the wrongness of preferring the undemocratic mechanism. The main lesson to take from the discussion of epistemic coordination in resource communities, I take it, is that not all deviations from democratic equality give rise to concerns about epistemic inequalities and the violation of the constitutive norms of belief.⁴⁸

45 - For example, the complex epistemic and political coordination mechanisms governing land and irrigation resource systems in Southern Switzerland—one of Ostrom's research cases in her seminal *Governing the Commons*—are known to have operated sustainably since the 13th century. Women, however, have been enfranchised only in 1970.

46 - This may be true also for our relations as *social* equals. See Daniel Viehoff, “Power and Equality”, in David Sobel, Peter Vallentyne, and Steven Wall (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, vol. 5, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 3-38. Hence, the problem I ascribe to the Peircean account might be but a special case of a larger problem of grounding democracy in relational egalitarian terms.

47 - Jon Elster, *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, at pp. 7-41.

48 - Historically, totalitarian regimes often established vibrant and highly productive scientific communities, in which the exchange of reasons could happen under terms of relative freedom and equality. A case in point is the Bolshevik science policy of the 1920s, which was directed against what the (non-Marxist) socialist thinker Alexander Herzen had called, in 1842, “the caste of scientists” and the “aristocracy of knowledge” of the tsarist empire. Alexander Herzen,

5. Broadening Democratic Equality

What is more, one might plausibly think that some kinds of deviations from democratic equality are not only compatible, but in some circumstances *required* for sustaining egalitarian epistemic relationships. If true, this would seem to add further complexity to the claim that democratic and epistemic equality are conceptually independent and that thus not all power inequalities are bad for the Peircean ideal of inquiry. Suppose a country votes on a policy proposal that aims to set up a commission of inquiry to investigate whether racism is a significant issue in law enforcement. There is no doubt that black people have a larger stake in that decision than non-black people, as not having the commission would lower the prospects of black victims of racism to have their testimonies and lived experience taken seriously. Given that black voters are disproportionately affected by the decision, can the norm of equal epistemic standing (here: equal opportunities for institutional uptake of black and non-black perspectives) offer a reason that their votes be given extra weight relative to non-black voters? Might it be, in other terms, that sustaining first-personally arrived-at open society norms require—if only temporary—selective disenfranchisements?

Advocates of the “proportional stake version” of the all-affected principle answer this question in the affirmative.⁴⁹ On this account, the voting power assigned to a person is proportional to the stake she has in a decision. Taken to the extreme, this implies that the vote of any person who is unaffected by the matter to be decided on would be assigned a weight of zero. There seems to be in the recent literature on political egalitarianism an increasing openness to see differential voting weights as compatible with democratic equality, especially if the focus is put on equalizing political status in the long run, perhaps even across human generations.⁵⁰ Deviations from strictly equal distributions of political power among all citizens (“one person, one vote”) might be justified as remedial measures in circumstances where the equal (epistemic or moral) status of members of some groups is under threat.⁵¹

Perhaps the Peircean democrat might be willing to adopt this broader understanding of democratic equality as it would partially alleviate the puzzle, set out in the previous section, that unequal distributions of (opportunities to access) power among citizens need not tarnish the epistemic egalitarianism

Selected Philosophical Works, translated from Russian by Lev Navrozov, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956, p. 53. [Cited in: Evgeny Blinov, “The New Scientific Policy: The Early Soviet Project of ‘State-Sponsored Evolutionism’”, *Social Epistemology*, 31:1, 2017, pp. 51-65.]

49 - Harry Brighouse and Marc Fleurbaey, “Democracy and Proportionality”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 18:2, 2010, pp. 137-55. Andreas Bengtson, “Differential Voting Weights and Relational Egalitarianism”, *Political Studies*, 68:4, 2020, pp. 1054-1070.

50 - See for a discussion James L. Wilson, *Democratic Equality*, *op. cit.*, ch. 3; Daniel Viehoff, “Power and Equality”, *art. cit.*

51 - This point is made explicitly in Kolodny, “Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy”, *art. cit.*, at p. 309.

underpinning the Peircean ideal of inquiry. *Some* deviations from equal suffrage—namely those that can be justified as compensations or remedies to epistemic injustice—might now be seen as conceptually internal to an account of Peircean epistemology, all other things being equal. Recall, however, that the central aim of PD is to debunk Viktor-ite inegalitarianism as philosophically self-defeating. The Viktors of our time are denying that citizens have equal political status. This is what commonly motivates their rejection of democratic decision-making. They need not (and surely will not) mobilize ad-hoc justifications grounded in epistemic, social, or any other kind of relationships (as in the inquiry commission example above) when they seek to subvert basic democratic arrangements such as the equal suffrage or equal deliberative opportunities.

Hence, even if Emilia—Viktor’s opponent who has remained a convinced democrat despite everything—came to embrace a broader, more complex understanding of democratic equality accommodating differential voting weights and other forms of selective disenfranchisements, she will still need to demonstrate the inconsistency of all those political inequalities which *cannot* reasonably be justified as remedial measures against other (non-political) status inequalities. I contend that this is the norm rather than the exception in contemporary developments of democratic disengagement. If all Emilia has at her disposal is the normative repertory of Peircean epistemology, this endeavor is unlikely to succeed as long as constitutional guarantees of equal access to agenda-setting and decision-making power are not unambiguously shown to be a constituent component of a community of truth-aspiring inquirers.

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RÉSUMÉ

Démocratie et égalitarisme épistémique

Dans leur approche non-instrumentaliste fondée sur l'épistémologie pragmatiste de Charles Sanders Peirce, Cheryl Misak et Robert Talisse proposent une version unique et importante des justifications épistémiques de la démocratie, suivant l'argument que la démocratie est un élément constituant de l'idéal peircien de l'enquête. Cet article interprète cet idéal comme reposant sur une conception relationnelle de l'*égalité épistémique*. L'article avance aussi que cette conception ne peut pas donner lieu à une justification sans équivoque d'institutions réalisant une conception d'*égalité politique*. L'objectif plus général est de mettre en garde contre l'emploi des affinités conceptuelles entre l'égalité démocratique, ses incitations à l'autoréflexion parmi les citoyens, et les relations épistémiques intrinsèquement valables pour fonder une justification de la démocratie.

ABSTRACT

Democracy and Epistemic Egalitarianism

Because of its non-instrumentalism, Cheryl Misak's and Robert Talisse's Peircean theory of democratic justification constitutes a unique and important variety of epistemic democracy. At its core is the claim that democracy is a constituent component of the Peircean epistemic ideal of inquiry. This article offers a relational egalitarian reading of this ideal and argues that Peircean *epistemic* egalitarianism fails to provide unambiguous support for our commitment to uphold *politically* egalitarian institutions. It cautions against using conceptual affinities between democratic equality, the self-reflexivity it enables among citizens, and worthwhile epistemic relationships as a basis for justifying democracy.